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The New York Times
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The Wall Street Journal A-18
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Notable & Quotable

From "The Talk of the Town," in the March 12 New Yorker:

With the completion of elections in Nicaragua, there is reason to hope that the war and the economic agony in that country may finally be coming to an end. As soon as President Bush heard the news of Violeta Chamorro's victory, he announced that "there is no reason at all for further military activity," and the Contras were called in from the field. The United States also moved swiftly to lift its embargo against Nicaragua. Farmers in the countryside there need no longer live in fear of attack. And for families in the cities—where food has been piling up in warehouses, because the currency has collapsed and people cannot afford to buy it—immediate relief for their hungry children is in sight.

In Washington, there was jubilation, and in El Salvador a spokesman for the government said that the defeat of the Sandinistas showed that "changes are not brought about by violent means." But, although the talk now is of peaceful transition, the reality is that for the greater part of the past decade violence was the cornerstone of the United States campaign in Nicaragua. Back in 1982, William Casey, the director of the Central Intelligence Agency, said, "It takes relatively few people and little support to disrupt the internal peace and economic stability of a small country," and the following year Duane Clarridge, the C.I.A.'s Nicaraguan chief, testified before a closed session of the House Intelligence Committee that the Contras, whom the C.I.A. funded and controlled, had killed "civilians and Sandinista officials in the provinces, as well as heads of cooperatives, nurses, doctors and judges." By the late nineteen-eighties, hundreds of schools and health clinics—what General John Galvin, then the head of the United States forces in Central America, described as "soft targets"—had been destroyed, and many of their staff members had been abducted or assassinated. All told, the war cost thirty thousand Nicaraguan lives.

On the economic front, Washington had since 1981 been pressuring banks and governments to cut off Nicaragua from all sources of outside funds. In 1985, the United States imposed a full-scale embargo. Meanwhile, Nicaragua remained in a perpetual state of mobilization; the government, in which military officials were assuming an increasingly large role, initiated an unpopular draft, and defense spending consumed more than half the national budget. The government met its deficit by printing more money and the result was soaring inflation. In 1985 and 1986, real wages fell by two-thirds; in 1988, the currency collapsed, and inflation hit thirty-three thousand per cent.

The Sandinista electoral slogan last month was "Everything will be better." But in fact only Mrs. Chamorro could promise an end to Nicaragua's woes, because only she had the support of the United States. The bargain was explicit. If Chamorro won, President Bush said in November, "the United States would be ready to lift the trade embargo and assist in Nicaragua's reconstruction." And in January, after the Contras had ambushed a civilian vehicle, wounding a bishop and killing two nuns, one of them a United States citizen, a State Department spokesman said that Washington "remains committed to the Resistance," and, depending on what happened in the election, had not "ruled out" continued Contra aid.

How long Nicaragua's relief lasts will depend in part on whether the United States is willing to let Nicaraguans rebuild their lives in a manner of their own choosing. During the early years of the Sandinistas' administration, they accomplished a modest social revolution, cutting the infant-mortality rate in half, getting polio, tuberculosis, and smallpox under control, and raising the literacy rate, which had been as low as any in Latin America. With the war and the embargo, those trends began to be reversed, and the Nicaraguans are now almost back where they were under the Somoza dictatorship.

In 1979, when the Somozas fell, and Nicaragua—after a hundred years of domination—broke away from the United States, the Cold War was Washington's rationale for hard-line policies overseas. Now the world has changed, and that rationale seems less and less relevant. The important question for the future of Nicaragua is: Will the United States, which has proved itself so intransigent about its role in Central America, begin to allow itself to change as well?

From "Gorbachev's Russia: Breakdown or Crackdown?" by Richard Pipes in the March issue of Commentary:

To say that we live in the midst of a worldwide political earthquake is to state the obvious. Democracy and capitalism, which "progressive" Western opinion had relegated to the archives, are everywhere toppling Communist (as well as right-wing) dictatorships with astonishing ease. The secular trend toward enhanced state authority and collectivism that was initiated by the Russian Revolution and accelerated by the Depression, began quietly to be reversed a decade ago in Great Britain and the United States. The elections of Margaret Thatcher in 1979 and of Ronald Reagan the year after appear in retrospect as historic watersheds, signaling a return to the traditions of genuine liberalism. The English and American electorates, increasingly made up of descendants of the lower classes who had benefited from capitalist prosperity to ascend in the middle class, had grown impatient with the burden of supporting the less productive elements of society. In the words of the late Theodore H. White, they had decided "that the costs of equality had come to crush the promise of opportunity." The radical intelligentsia, which in its quest for political influence had played on class resentments, suddenly found the ranks of its followers thinning.